# Comma Usage

The comma—the most frequently used mark of punctuation—is used mainly **to group words that belong together** and **to separate those that do not.** Some other uses have little to do with meaning but are simply **customary** ways of punctuating sentences.

The following is a list of the most common and important reasons for using commas.

### A. The Most Common Uses

A1. Separating **items in a Series**

* **Example:**

She was formerly on the staff of the embassies in **Moscow**, **Berlin**, **Vienna**, and **Madrid**.

**Note:** The comma before the *final* conjunction, in this case the *and*, is optional, as long as you are consistent.

A2. Separating **two or more adjectives preceding (coming before) a noun**

* **Example**:

We patiently sat through a **long**, **dull**, amateurish performance.

**Note:** Do not use a comma before the final adjective in a series if the adjective is thought of as part of the noun. Example: It was a cold, raw, dark November day.

**Note 2:** If one of the words in a series modifies another word in the series, do not separate them by a comma.

**Example**:

He wore a bright blue blazer. (*blue* modifies *blazer* and *bright* modifies *blue)*

A3. Between long independent clauses joined by a conjunction (such as *and, but, or, nor, for,* or *yet).*

* **Example**:

The first two acts were slow-moving, **but** the third act was full of

action and suspense.

**Note:** Remember to *always* use a comma before *for* if it means *because.*

**Complete Comma Usage Exercise 1 Handout**

## B. Nonessential Elements

B1. To set off **nonessential clauses**

* **Example**:

Joan Thomas, **who was offered scholarships to three colleges**, will go to Mt. Holyoke in September. (The nonessential clause set off by commas does not affect the basic meaning of the sentence).

**An easy way to identify this type of clause: it always begins with *who, which,* or (in rare cases) *that.***

B2. To set off **nonessential participial phrases**

What is a participial phrase? It’s a phrase that begins with a verb. A participial phrase that begins with a verb ending in -*ing* is called a *present participial phrase.*  A participial phrase that begins with a verb ending in –*ed* or *–t* is called a past participial phrase.

* **Examples:**

My brother, **waiting until the last minute**, decided to come for a visit.

(present participial phrase)

The package, **sent to the wrong address**, was extremely heavy.

(past participial phrase)

**Complete Comma Usage Exercises 2 and 3 Handouts**

# C. Introductory Elements

C1**.** Afterwordssuchas ***well, yes, no,* and *why*** when they begin a sentence

* **Example**:

**Yes**, you were elected.

C2. After an **introductory participial phrase** (phrases beginning with verbs).

* **Examples:**

**Behaving like a spoiled child**, he pouted and sulked.

**Washing and polishing the car**, I developed sore muscles.

C3. Commas after **a succession of introductory prepositional phrases**

* **Example:**

**At the edge of the deep woods near Lakeville in Cumberland County**, they built a small log cabin.

* **Note:** A *single* introductory prepositional phrase need *not* be followed by a comma unless it is parenthetical (by the way, on the contrary, etc.) or the comma is necessary to prevent confusion.
* **Examples:**

By the way, I had a letter from Edith.

With the weak, competition is unpopular.

In the morning I am never wide awake.

C4. Commas after **introductory adverb clauses**

* **Example**:

**While Mario put the costume on**, the accompanist played “Deep Purple”.

( *While* is being used as an adverb here, *not* as a preposition)

* **Note**: An adverb clause at the *end* of a sentence is ***not* usually set off**.

**Complete Comma Usage Exercise 4 Handout**

# D. Interrupters

D1. Set off, with commas, **appositives and appositive phrases** (these are words or phrases that follow nouns or pronouns and *identify* or *explain* them; I call them “mini-definitions”)

* **Example**:

A syndicated column by Bernice Silverman, **the noted writer**, will appear in the *Times-News*, **a local paper**.

**Note:** When an appositive is so closely related to the word it modifies that it appears to be part of the word, *no comma is necessary*. It is usually one word.

**Example:**

Her cousin Raquel.

D2. Words used in **direct address** (talking *to* a person, not *about* them)

* **Example**:

I don’t know, **Alice**, where your brother is.

D3. **Parenthetical expressions** such as *I am sure, on the contrary, by the way, in fact, for example,* and *however.*

* **Example**:

My parents will, **I am sure,** let me have the car tonight.

# E. Conventional Uses

E1. Dates and addresses

* **Example**:

Our sentimental idea was to hold a class reunion on June 20,

1980, at the old high school.

**Note:** When *only* the month and day are given, no punctuation is necessary.

* **Example**:

It was on May 10 that we began work.

E2. After the salutation of a friendly letter and at the closing of any letter

* **Examples**:

Dear Rhonda,

Sincerely yours,

E3. After a name followed by *Jr., Sr., Ph.D.,* etc.

* **Examples**—Frank Lehman, Jr.

Hazel Sellers, Ph.D.

**Complete Comma Usage Exercise 5 Handout**

**Final Note**: Commas should not be sprinkled about in your writing as if they were salt, merely to add flavor. The tendency of modern writers is to **use commas sparingly.** You should be able to show and/or explain either that the commas you use help the reader to understand what you have written or that they are required by custom—as in a date or address, for example. Using commas just for the fun of it is as bad as not using them when necessary. Your competence will be called into question if you use commas when they cannot be justified.

Comma Usage Exercise 1

Directions: Place commas in the areas in which they belong. Refer to your Comma Usage rundown if unsure. Write the number and letter of the rules that apply in the blanks under each sentence (for example, A1). Be prepared to defend your answers when we go over these in class.

1. The police searched everywhere but there were no fingerprints to be found.

2. Mr. Feinstein asked the waiter for coffee beans and ham and eggs.

3. States included in the Japanese beetle area are New York New Jersey Maryland and Delaware.

4. I played the melody on the guitar and the electric bass provided the rhythm.

5. Everyone turned to watch the large pale yellow moon.

6. This policy covers medical expenses iron-lung rental hospitalization and transportation to a center of treatment.

7. The train pulled out and left me in a strange town without my luggage hat and coat or credentials.

8. The school administration is responsible for these disciplinary problems stem from the rules made in the office.

9. This poet did not use capital letters and her punctuation was frequently unconventional.

10. The wagon train was approaching lonely wild country.

11. The wind froze us the rain soaked us and the waves tossed us.

12. We are learning more and more about space through our new and stronger telescopes our huge radar installations and our instrument-packed space probes.

13. She found that it was a friendly unsophisticated little town that she had chosen for her home.

14. Soldiers were stationed at frequent intervals along the curb and the sidewalks behind them were jammed with onlookers.

15. She is pretty tall and blonde; her sister is small and dark and beautiful.

Comma Usage Exercise 2 Handout

Directions: Place commas in the areas in which they belong. Refer to your Comma Usage rundown if unsure. Write the number and letter of the rules that apply in the blanks under each sentence (for example, A1). Be prepared to defend your answers when we go over these in class.

1. Friends who do favors for you may expect you to do favors for them.

2. The Welcoming Committee who made us feel at home in a strange school helped us through the first confusing days of the term.

3. Our new Buick which my parents bought in Detroit is a four-door model.

4. The Buick which Mr. Burton drives is like the one we saw on television.

5. She is wearing the sweater that she received for Christmas.

6. Her new sweater which was a Christmas gift is two sizes too large.

7. People who are nervous do not make good drivers.

8. Men who are sometimes thought to be the stronger sex cannot stand pain as well as women.

9. American cities that are outwardly very much alike may show distinctive characteristics on more intimate acquaintance.

10. Cities that have great financial problems levy a sales tax.

11. The Sault Saint Marie Canals which connect Lake Superior and Lake Huron would be a prime target in wartime.

12. I do not like people who litter public parks.

13. These antiquated tariffs which were necessary during the depression are shutting off foreign markets from American manufacturers.

14. Many people who settled America came to escape tyranny.

15. The Hudson’s Bay Company which is one of the oldest trading firms in the world was founded in 1670.

16. Leontyne Price who is well-known for her role as Cleopatra is one of the world’s leading sopranos.

17. The book that I have read for this report is a novel about World War II.

18. On my return I found that the people that I had expected to see had moved away.

19. Lucy French who does her own gardening says she exhausts herself trying to

get rid of weeds.

20. All the tickets that had been sold were recalled.

Comma Usage Exercise 3 Handout

Directions: Place commas in the areas in which they belong. Refer to your Comma Usage rundown if unsure. Write the number and letter of the rules that apply in the blanks under each sentence (for example, A1). Be prepared to defend your answers when we go over these in class.

1. Any student who wishes to join the gymnastics team will have to excel in floor exercises on the balance beam and on the uneven parallel bars.

2. The sophomores decorated the gym and the juniors provided the refreshments.

3. Anyone taking the basic photography course will learn how to shoot close-ups portraits and still lifes.

4. The judge leaving her chambers stopped to talk to some court reporters who had gathered around her.

5. We got encouragement from everyone but our parents helped us most of all.

6. Careful writers distinguish between uninterested which means “indifferent” and disinterested which means “unbiased.”

7. Any student wishing to sing act or perform on Class Day should sign up before tomorrow which is the deadline.

8. Governor Quigley whose speeches are filled with clichés appeared on television last night asking people to “tighten their belts bite the bullet pull their own weight and give till it hurts.”

9. A sad-looking mongrel which had followed me halfway home suddenly trotted up to me and staring at me soulfully started to lick my hand.

10. A story which appeared in yesterday’s newspaper was about the Toronto

Maple Leafs which is my favorite hockey team.

Comma Usage Exercise 4 Handout

Directions: Place commas in the areas in which they belong. Refer to your Comma Usage rundown if unsure. Write the number and letter of the rules that apply in the blanks under each sentence (for example, A1). Be prepared to defend your answers when we go over these in class.

1. One look at the assignment is not enough for most students will need to study it carefully.

2. When we had finished playing the piano was rolled offstage to make room for the next act.

3. On the afternoon of the first day of school the halls were still filled with lost confused or frightened freshmen.

4. Well if you need help please don’t hesitate to ask me or Mrs. Seil or Mrs. Faust.

5. In the second half of the third period Johnson evaded the defense caught a twenty-yard pass and raced into the end zone.

6. Speaking in assembly yesterday Katy Stover urged students to obey the new rules governing conduct in the cafeteria the school corridors and the parking lot.

7. Having studied the tax proposals of both political parties Governor Ross who was not satisfied rejected both proposals and then presented a new plan.

8. Marchers in the long orderly picket line appeared to have the support of everyone in the crowd but the police carrying out their orders broke up the demonstration.

9. Legitimate theaters are prospering in many American cities but the New York stage is still the goal of young actors dancers and musicians.

10. When Bill was driving our truck lurched unexplainably and we wondered

whether he was falling asleep at the wheel.

Comma Usage Exercise 5 Handout

Directions: Place commas in the areas in which they belong. Refer to your Comma Usage rundown if unsure. Write the number and letter of the rules that apply in the blanks under each sentence (for example, A1). Be prepared to defend your answers when we go over these in class.

1. The final act a general free-for-all had the first-night audience a dignified crowd holding their sides.

2. Indeed if I knew the answer my friend I would not be asking you for it.

3. The authors of this book a volume of bitter criticism have in my opinion been most unfair.

4. This painting Betty is by Emilio Sanchez an artist born in Cuba.

5. Russian artists on the other hand must promote Communist doctrines for everyone in Russia works for the state.

6. Our plan I knew would have to succeed for there would be no second chance.

7. The nineteenth-century book *El Jibaro* which was written by Manuel A. Alonso is by the way considered the first Puerto Rican classic.

8. Imprisoned without warning or explanation the two reporters were held if I remember correctly for two months in spite of efforts by England France and the United States to effect their release.

9. If you are prompt in getting your order in our office will guarantee delivery before Christmas which is only ten days off.

10. You should understand my good friend that much as I should like to do so I cannot give money to every organization that thinks it needs help.

11. Passengers riding in the front of the wrecked bus were the ones who were most severely injured.

12. This school composed largely of students from farm homes must offer courses in agriculture the occupation that most of the students will enter.

13. Looking for a sports car at a bargain price Henry who is car-crazy spent the day hanging around the North Country Motor Company which buys sells and services all makes of foreign cars.

14. Lauren and Jim left alone in the house immediately raided the refrigerator which was full of tasty items for the party that Kay’s mother was giving the next day.

15. Napoleon’s brothers Joseph and Lucien tried to prevent him from selling Louisiana but Richard Livingston and James Monroe the American representatives succeeded in making the purchase.

16. Well having tried all morning to reach me the girls delivered the message and I gave them a written reply which I hoped would be satisfactory.

17. In spite of their parents’ warning Amy and Joan who should have known better stayed up reading the night before the test and didn’t get to sleep they admitted until 2 o’clock.

18. Taking an afternoon stroll in the park my little sister Sally befriended a retriever a spaniel and a mutt that followed her home.

19. Before you start taking anything apart Maria I hope you will be sure that you can if necessary put it together again.

20. When Jimmie had finished the cake and pie were all gone and left untouched were the steak potatoes and salad.